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ABSTRACT

The (CBS Radio) Columbia Workshop, formed in 1936, encouraged the writing and production of creative, non-traditional radio drama such as Archibald MacLeish's verse play "The Fall of the City," which aired on April 11, 1937. MacLeish considered radio the ideal medium for poetry because it offers only aural stimuli without competition from visual stimuli. In "The Fall of the City" a conqueror arrives and the people of the city fall at his feet, but when he lifts the visor on his helmet, there is no one inside the armor. The radio announcer, acting in the tradition of the Greek chorus, states the theme of the drama: people invent their oppressors. The part of the announcer was played by Orson Welles. Crowd noises were created by recording the sounds of students and extras earlier and playing it back during the live performance while the extras repeated their noise. "The Fall of the City" was a significant event because it was prophetic of events to come, such as the fall of Vienna to Hitler, and also because it represented the first attempt by an American poet to create a verse play expressly for radio. In general, "The Fall of the City" met with public acceptance and critical acclaim. (SRT)

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Changing the Shape of American Radio Drama: Innovation and Representation in Archibald MacLeish's The Fall of the City

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Changing the Shape of American Radio Drama:

Innovation and Representation in Archibald MacLeish's

The Fall of the City

American radio drama of the 1930's was not, in general, experimental or innovative. Governed by economic laws similar to those affecting television in the '80's, the typical radio drama of fifty years ago usually consisted of comedy series, mystery programs, adventures and romances, or radio adaptations of successful stage plays or films. Such fare was harmless, entertaining and, above all, immensely popular. Commercial advertisers were eager to sponsor such programs, and audiences were built up over time who came to expect familiar stories and only slightly varying themes. Radical experimentation with either the medium or the message was not one of the major characteristics of the sponsored radio program of the '30's.

It was, rather, the Columbia Workshop which provided the opportunities for writers and directors to diverge from the more established formats of the time. Formed in 1936 by W. B. Lewis, head of the program division at CBS at the time, the Workshop encouraged the writing and production of creative, non-traditional radio drama (Coulter vi). Irving Reis became the director of the CBS sustaining enterprise. His own innovative scripts--among them, The Half Pint Flask, St. Louis Blues, and Meridian 7-1212--became models of thematic audacity and technical experimentation. Under his leadership, the Columbia Workshop flourished and grew in respect among both general public and prominent authors. Only a little more than a year after its inception, one writer called the Columbia Workshop "the most important laboratory in America for artistic and technical research in radio drama" (Hood 21). Douglas Coulter, Assistant Director of Broadcasts for CBS during the late '30's, explained the wide variety of programs broadcast by the Workshop:

> Except for about a dozen commissioned scripts, the Workshop has chosen from unsolicited scripts, producing those which seem worth while. There are no restrictions as to form, content, treatment, or subject matter; anything goes, as long as it is in good taste and makes a good story. (xv)

Among the names of some of America's finest writers was the contributor of one of the Workshop's most successful plays. His name was Archibald MacLeish, and his play was The Fall of the City. This paper discusses the importance of the play to the development of radio drama, and analyzes briefly some of its internal characteristics which might account for its success and its influence.

The Poet's Perfect Audience

Archibald MacLeish is best known, of course, not as a radio dramatist but as a poet. A well-educated man (Yale, Harvard) who had served as a captain in the U.S. Army during World War I, MacLeish soon gave up a successful law practice to turn his attention completely to the field of poetry, long his avocation and first love. After a period of six years spent in Europe (1923-28), MacLeish returned to the United States, an acknowledged poet whose skill was widely admired (Smith 6). During the years to follow, he would create some of the world's most beautiful and memorable poetry: New Found Land, Streets in the Moon, Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City, Conquistador.

The Fall of the City marked MacLeish's first attempt at writing a radio drama. Panic, a verse play for the stage, written in 1935, had proved a testing ground for MacLeish's ability to convey a message written in poetry but carried to an audience via dramatic presentation as opposed to the written word. Regarding the attraction of the former method, MacLeish asked rhetorically, "What poet ever lived who was really satisfied with writing the thin little books to lie on the front parlor tables?" (MacLeish ix).

MacLeish took about six months to write The Fall of the City, beginning in the summer of 1936. His reasons for writing the play were twofold: (1) He wanted to express to the public a theme which he felt was particularly relevant to the times, a theme that concerned itself with tyranny, resistance, and the price of liberty; (2) He wished to set an example for other writers, poets and non-poets, in his use of verse and medium. He hoped that the production of The Fall of the City would serve as an incentive to others who might be reluctant to attempt the writing of a verse play for radio.

In the foreward to his play, MacLeish explained at some length his reasons for believing that radio was the ideal medium for the poet. Of primary importance was the fact that there existed on radio no competition to the spoken word. Unlike the theatre audience, the radio audience had no stimulation of the other senses which could in any way diminish the power of the poetry. In an insightful and colorful example from the realm of Wagnerian opera, MacLeish made his point:

> Over the radio verse has no visual presence to compete with. Only the ear is engaged and the ear is already half poet. It believes at once: creates and believes. It is the eye which is the realist. It is the eye which must fit everything together, must see everything before and behind. It is the eye and not the ear which refuses to believe in the lovely girlhood of the middle-aged soprano who sings Isolde, or the delicate, water-troubling slenderness of the three fat Rhine maidens ridiculously paddling at the ends of three steel ropes. With the eye closed or staring at nothing verse has every power over the ear. The ear accepts, accepts and believes, accepts and creates. The ear is the poet's perfect audience, his only true audience. And it is radio and only radio which can give him public access to this perfect friend. (x)

Another reason for the poet to write verse expressly for radio rested in the fact that the "radio announcer" character, a figure quite normal and acceptable to radio audiences, provided the ideal vehicle to convey information, exposition, or opinion regarding the action of the play. He functioned much like the Greek chorus, but without the stylization or rigidity of the latter, allowing natural transitions without obscuring meaning or locale. On this second point at least one radio writer chose to differ with MacLeish, calling the narrator a "characteristic wind-bag," and asking, with a device like this, "Why bother to create a dramatic scene to carry your story? . . . It is frightfully poor writing at best" (Alexander).

Other reasons which MacLeish advanced concerning the radio poet consisted of the following: the recent suspension of the WPA experimental theatre had left a void in the production of innovative drama; also, because radio production costs were lower, more risks could be taken in the trial of new ideas and techniques, quite unlike the vested commercial interests governing Broadway; finally, radio provided a much larger audience for the poet, even though this audience was neither immediate nor capable of generating instant feedback. This "infinitely greater" audience was a key factor in MacLeish's enthusiasm for the medium, a consideration which "alone should deeply move the American poet whose present tragedy is his isolation from any audience vigorous enough to demand his strongest work" (MacLeish xiii).

There were, of course, certain reservations, and MacLeish pointed these out as well. A radio play should not exceed thirty minutes; beyond that, it was very difficult to hold the listener. Obscurity was to be avoided. "To do the trick bold and legible themes must be used," MacLeish stated. "Poetry to be understood must be simple and clear, and that is the keynote of success in writing for the air" (Dunlap "Radio Challenges").

The Whole Square is Faces

MacLeish practiced what he had been preaching. While The Fall of the City contains obvious metaphorical devices, events which are not entirely unambiguous, and speeches best described as cryptic at times, the poetry is always simple and clear, the theme always bold and legible. The message is clear yet inviting of our own special interpretations. This poetry, like all good poetry, resists a capsule summary in a mundane prose more suitable to a newspaper story. If we are not always certain what exactly is meant by a phrase or a speech, it is because there is no exact meaning that we should attach to it. Part of the beauty of the poetry and the power of the drama lies in the fact that we, the listeners (or the readers), are free to interpret the symbols as we see fit. MacLeish has given us the story; we are to draw the conclusions.

The story itself may be summarized without difficulty; the effect of hearing the actual broadcast can only be imagined. The play opens on a large public square in an unnamed city. A large crowd has assembled, and we, the audience, are to receive reports on what is happening through the radio announcer, situated off to one side of the action, describing to us what he sees:

Voice of the Announcer:

> We are here on the central plaza.
>
> We are well off to the eastward edge.
>
> There is a kind of terrace over the crowd here.
>
> It is precisely four minutes to twelve.
>
> The crowd is enormous: there might be ten thousand:
>
> There might be more: the whole square is faces. (MacLeish 4)

It is through the announcer and his "on-site" microphone that the entire proceedings of the play are made known to us. We learn that the excitement of the large crowd is due to the fact that at noon on the past three days a dead woman

has risen from her grave and appeared to the people. Today they expect her to reappear and perhaps to speak. They are not disappointed:

Voice of the Dead Woman:

Death is young in me to fear!
My dress is kept still in the press in my bedchamber:
No one has broken the dish of the dead woman.
Nevertheless I must speak painfully:
I am to stand here in the sun and speak:
The city of masterless men
Will take a master.
There will be shouting then:
Blood after! (7)

This announcement results in panic. Soon a messenger arrives with word that a conqueror has landed on the nearby coast, advancing toward the city. The resulting frenzy is temporarily subdued by the subtle arguments of the pacifist orator, urging the people to follow a nonviolent course to foil the invader:

Voice of the Orator:

Force is a greater enemy than this conqueror--
A treacherous weapon.
Nevertheless my friends there <u>is</u> a weapon!
Weakness conquers!
Against chainlessness who breaks?
Against wall-lessness who vaults?
Against forcelessness who forces? (15)

Soon thereafter a second messenger arrives with a progress report on the conqueror who, we learn, requires no resistance; he brings with him his own enemy. Panic again ensues. The priests of the city then attempt to persuade the people

to turn to their gods, and an uncontrolled religious ritual begins; a young girl is almost sacrificed in the excited confusion. A General interrupts the proceedings with a strong appeal to the people to resist the invader:

Voice of the General:

You! Are you free? Will you fight?

There are still inches for fighting!

There is still a niche in the streets!

You can stand on the stairs and meet him!

You can hold in the dark of a hall!

You can die!

---or your children will crawl for it! (28)

The General's advice is not heeded, and the people run wildly throughout the square, destroying their weapons and shouting:

Voices of Citizens:

Masterless men must take a master!

Order must master us!

Freedom's for fools: Force is the certainty!

Freedom has eaten our strength and corrupted our virtues!

Men must be ruled!

Fools must be mastered!

Rigor and fast will restore us our dignity!

Chains will be liberty! (30)

The conqueror finally appears, clothed entirely in armor. The people cower at his feet, trembling, wretched, as he lifts the visor on his helmet. Only the announcer sees the terrible truth of the situation:

Voice of the Announcer:

There's no one at all! . . . No one! . . . The helmet is hollow!

> They don't see! They lie on the paving. They lie in the burnt spears:
> The ashes of arrows. They lie there. . .
> They don't see or they won't see. They are silent. . . . (32)

It is the announcer, in the tradition of the Greek chorus, who states the theme of the drama at this point:

> The people invent their oppressors: they wish to believe in them.
> They wish to be free of their freedom: released from their liberty:--
> The long labor of liberty ended!
> They lie there! (32)

When the crowd begins shouting with happiness over their "new freedom," the announcer's final words ring out the close of the play: "The city has fallen" (33).

Signs and Symbols

In his probing analysis of The Fall of the City, L. C. Hood discusses the central theme and the author's use of the parable to convey a message:

> What the author has to say in this parable of ancient times in which the present is mirrored by the past is to provide an interpretation of what is happening to a world which feels itself being doomed by the spread of dictatorships. He has said what he has to say in poetry that apparently obscures his theme but really reduces the complexity of the present age to symbols which when examined are more simple and more intense than the real thing. (22)

The characters are all highly symbolic. The Conqueror represents anti-democratic influences apparently coming from without (and typified by the gradual Nazification of Western Europe at the time). The Dead Woman is a symbol of those who prophesy that democracy is doomed. The Liberal Orator represents all those who claim that not force but more tolerance will lead humanity to victory over its

oppressors. It is the Crowd which is the tragic hero and central focus of the play.

High School Students and Army Trucks

The Fall of the City aired at 7:00 PM, EST, on Sunday, April 11, 1937, on the CBS radio network, WABC, New York. This time slot on that particular evening was occupied by Jack Benny (WEAF), Forum Hour (WOR), Symphony Concert (WNYC), and News (WMCA). The play was preceded on WABC by the Rubinoff Orchestra at 6:30 and followed at 7:30 by Phil Baker, comedian (Radio Schedule).

The part of the announcer was played by Orson Welles, personally recruited earlier for the part by director Irving Reis. The morning of the broadcast, Burgess Meredith had walked into the CBS studios and had asked for a part in the play; he was given the role of the Pacifist Orator ("Fall"). House Jameson played the studio director who announced the story and set the locale for the radio announcer to take over. The dead woman was played by Adelaide Klein, the Priest by Edgar Stehli, and the General by William Pringle.

The "crowd" consisted of students from New York University and several New Jersey high schools, along with boys' club members. They numbered about two hundred but were made to sound like ten thousand by the process of recording their sounds earlier in the day and then playing them back later through large loudspeakers during the actual performance, at which time these same extras repeated their vocalizations. The recordings formed a second "layer" of sound behind the live noises being generated during the broadcast (Dunlap "The Fall of the City").

These sound effects were made all the more realistic by the natural ambience of the radio stage. The broadcast took place from the drill hall of the Seventh Regiment Armory at Park Avenue and 66th Street in New York City. The size of the place was ideal for the large group of extras, and echos were easily generated. One unforeseen event almost spoiled the play's opening, however. At five minutes

to seven, the huge Armory door opened and two five-ton Army trucks pulled into the building, creating noise, confusion, and a break in concentration. The incident was quickly controlled, however, and the broadcast went smoothly ("Fall").

A Prophecy and a Trend

The significance of The Fall of the City should not be underestimated. The drama represents an important contribution on at least three counts. First, a sense of extreme realism in sound effects was achieved and maintained by the use of the Armory and a large cast as opposed to a normal studio and recorded crowd noises. The technical aspects of the antiphonal chorus sounds, crowd responses, and individual speeches required the careful placement and mixing of four microphones in a vast building with difficult acoustics.

Second, the drama deals with a provocative theme. The story was remarkably relevant to the times, when Europe was undergoing the turbulence and distress of the Anschluss, the bringing together of all the Germanic and Slavic nationalities. Within only a few months of this broadcast, Vienna would fall to Hitler; soon thereafter, Prague would succumb to the Third Reich, then Memel, then Tirana. As Coulter put it, "A repetition of The Fall of the City on any of these occasions would have given the program almost the sharp edge of a news dramatization" (350). The play was a grim testimony to the fact that cities and nations are composed of large masses willing to follow a leader and eager to accept his decisions and his visions of the future. MacLeish's play was an unhappy prophecy.

Finally, and by no means least in importance, is the fact that The Fall of the City represents the first attempt by an American poet to create a verse play expressly for American radio. The play was not an adaptation from a stage play, novel, film, or verse anthology; it was written solely for radio. Geoffrey Bridson's verse drama, The March of the '45, had been broadcast in England in 1936,

and the BBC had given air time to the experimental radio dramas of T. S. Eliot and James Hilton, but until April of 1937, American audiences had had no opportunity to hear any productions of this type ("Poetic Drama"). The success of MacLeish's drama was a major force in the creation of subsequent verse drama for radio, most notably in the poetic dramas written during the war years by Norman Corwin. MacLeish had hoped to establish a new direction and create interest in this new form. To a limited extent, he succeeded.

Poetry as Public Speech

The Fall of the City met with public acceptance and critical acclaim. Ralph Thompson, writing in The New York Times, realized the significance of the event: "This broadcast proved, perhaps for the first time, that the radio has an enormous artistic potential and that music is not the only means by which its commercial banalities may be tempered." Gilbert Seldes wrote that the work was a "highly dramatic and imaginative play in favor of human freedom. The Columbia Broadcasting System is to be congratulated on having made the production. . . Perhaps the fact that an experiment of this sort was made by one of the networks is as important as Mr. MacLeish's attempt to use radio" (61). Orrin Dunlap was equally excited by the broadcast, and expressed his unreserved optimism about the future of verse radio drama: "Mr. MacLeish has pointed the way, and the talented poets, who have been shy of the microphone or the microphone shy of them, as it was for a long time of comedians, now have the gateway open to the studio in which verse plays may be electrified and sprayed through every city and hamlet" ("The Fall of the City").

Negative criticisms were, in general, minor in nature and few in number. One writer felt that MacLeish's Conqueror was too brittle an abstraction to carry any real power (Larkin 893). Seldes thought the speeches were too long and that the action should have moved away occasionally from the square to the advancing

Conqueror (62). Dunlap stated that some of the actors seemed to rush through their lines much too quickly, placing a burden on the listeners ("The Fall of the City"). One reviewer seemed to have missed the point completely, suggesting that the locale be not an ancient Mayan city but rather a modern walled European city. The listener's imagination had to work so hard "that the thrill of the climax was lessened" (Wyatt).

The Fall of the City was considered one of the highpoints of the Columbia Workshop, and is included in Douglas Coulter's anthology of the Workshop's best plays (351-78). The drama was performed again on CBS on January 9, 1938, several months before MacLeish's second verse play for radio, Air Raid, was broadcast. Additionally, The Fall of the City received numerous staged productions on college campuses across the country, including a special dance-drama adaptation at Smith College in June, 1938 ("Students at Smith"). Clearly, the play had come at the right time and had had an impact upon the American public and upon the earlier notions of what did or did not constitute good radio drama. Perhaps Dayton Kohler, writing in The South Atlantic Quarterly in October, 1939, best summarized the aesthetic contribution of MacLeish to a pre-World War II America certain of its own goals but unsure of its global mission:

> Archibald MacLeish has brought poetry back to the language of public speech, poetry that is once more a record of man's common fate. Written in an age of crisis, his work is an act of participation in the living world. . . he is a spokesman of the modern age, and, I believe, the most challenging poet in America today. From him the poetry of nameless men of anonymous generations, not a poetry of collective dialectics but a literature of beliefs and emotions that form an enduring pattern of human life. . . He reaffirms the idea of human freedom in poetry that belongs to our country and our times.

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